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TRANSLATING PROVERBS

Rendering proverbs from one language into another is one of the most difficult issues in translation practice. The proverb is an extremely complex lexical structure that belongs to the oral tradition and to the anonymous genius of the language. Its scholarly counterpart is the aphorism that has a well-known artist and which is constructed according to an often very complex poetics. Paremiological collections appeared already in Antiquity. They were appreciated and judged by comparison/interference with scholarly famous collections of great sayings by great authors.

The proverb can be considered an abridged form of gnostic literature, the conclusion of a fiction that is often presupposed or abridged. The Romanian linguist Pavel Ruxăndoiu analyzed the relationship between the word and the proverb and came to the following conclusion: "If we analyze it in connection with the word, the proverb is, therefore, a more complex linguistic unit, characterized by a higher level of organization of the elements making up the inventory of a language. This complexity is the consequence of the fact that proverbs are not themselves elements of the inventory of language, but stable forms of organization within which each component is in contextual relations determined by the other components" (Ruxăndoiu 2003, p. 47)[1].

Context must be understood here in the Coşerian sense as linguistic con-text, cultural con-text, and the universe of the discourse (the universal system of significations to which a discourse belongs and which determines its meanings and its capacity to be understood). According to Eugeniu Coşeriu: "By the universe of the discourse we mean the universal system of significations to which a discourse (or statement) belongs and which determines its validity and meaning" (Coşeriu 2004, p. 324)[2]. Literature, mythology, science, they are all universes of the discourse, i.e. they are world of references for the discourse. According to Coşeriu, (cf. *Teoria limbajului*) the correlation and the interference of all these con-texts and universes of significations give the features of the paremiologic discourse.

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[1] „Raportat la cuvânt, proverbul constituie, deci, o unitate lingvistică mai complexă, la un nivel mai înalt de organizare a elementelor care alcătuiesc inventarul limbii Această complexitate reiese din faptul că proverbele nu constituie ele însele elemente al inventarului limbii, ci forme stabile de organizare, în interiorul cărora fiecare componentă intră în relații contextual determinate cu celălalte componente".

[2] „Prin univers de discurs înțelegem sistemul universal de semnificații căruia îi aparține un discurs (sau enunț) şi care îi determină validitatea şi sensul".

DACOROMANIA, serie nouă, XVIII, 2013, nr. 2, Cluj-Napoca, p. 95–105

If we intend to make a comparison between the English proverbs and the Romanian proverbs, we must construct this comparison according to two possible couples: on the one hand, John Heywood and Iuliu Zanne; on the other hand, Michael Drayton and Anton Pann.

In 1538 John Heywood (1497?–1580) published *A Collection* containing „the number in effect of all the proverbes in the English tongue”. In 1546 Heywood increased his collection of wise thoughts and expressions with 300 „newly added and made” proverbs. Here are some of the best known proverbs from Heywood's 1546 collection:

- *What you have, hold.*
- *Haste maketh waste.*
- *Out of sight out of mind.*
- *When the sun shineth, make hay.*
- *Look ere ye leap.*
- *Two heads are better than one.*
- *Love me, love my dog.*
- *Beggars should be no choosers.*
- *All is well that ends well.*
- *The fat is in the fire.*
- *I know on which side my bread is buttered.*
- *One good turn asketh another.*
- *A penny for your thought.*
- *Rome was not built in one day.*
- *Better late than never.*
- *An ill wind that bloweth no man to good.*
- *The more the merrier.*
- *You cannot see the wood for the trees.*
- *This hitteth the nail on the head.*
- *No man ought to look a given horse in the mouth.*
- *Many hands make light work.*

Between 1895–1903 Iuliu Zanne published his nine volume collection of proverbs entitled *Proverbele românilor din România, Basarabia, Bucovina, Ungaria, Istria şi Macedonia* [Proverbs of the Romanians from România, Basarabia, Bucovina, Ungaria, Istria, and Macedonia; Zanne 2003–2004]. It is true that over three hundred years separate Heywood and Zanne but there is something connecting them. Both scholars tried to save, by way of collecting and printing, the richness of an oral culture that was under dire threat because of the aggressively emergent modernist culture. It is true that this new advent occurred much sooner in the West but its dimensions and effects are tragically similar. John Heywood's collection joined to the effort of other Elizabethan scholars and writers who tried to

preserve the richness of the English oral culture already under threat by the modern policies of land exploitation and social management. As soon as the English aristocracy understood that it could make more money by "enclosing" land and driving their former serfs and yeomen away, raising sheep and limiting traditional farming, traditional medieval, oral culture was doomed. The serfs and yeoman were driven away and obliged to find work in the wool manufactures of the time, oral culture was doomed. In Britain, modernity found it dying in the slums of the big Victorian urban agglomerations.

Iuliu Zanne's agenda is different but he shares with Heywood the awareness that an oral traditional culture is dying out. Zanne collects the proverbs from an area that surpasses the boundaries of today's Romania as a marker of a Romanian national identity that is still not very sure of its modern contours and where the oral/aural still plays an extremely important role in shaping the literary, the formal and highest level of a national(-ized) culture. Both personalities, both cultures feel the need to hoard the proverbs, but for different purposes. With Heywood, they are a marker of a national past, with Zanne they are the foundation of a national future. European contexts are different and proverbs are the texts that provide excellent con-texts for these socio-cultural evolutions.

Proverbs also constitute the material of literary works both in English and in Romanian literature. Michael Drayton (1563–1631) published *Idea* in 1619. It is a collection of sonnets, a genre very much in vogue during the Elizabethan and Jacobean. Interesting, for us, is "Sonnet 59" also entitled "To Proverbs" where the poet and Love discuss the amorous excitement exchanging proverbs. The intensity of the allegorical dialogue reminds one, on the other hand, of George Herbert's ardent *Love* poem, a masterpiece of the Baroque.

As Love and I late harboured in one inn,
With Proverbs thus each other entertain.
„In Love there is no lock", thus I begin:
„Fair words make fools", replieth he again.
„Who spares to speak, doth spare to speed", quoth I.
„As well", saith he, „too forward as too slow".
„Fortune assists the boldest", I reply.
„A hasty man", quoth he, „ne'er wanted woe!"
„Labour is light, where love", quoth I, „doth pay".
Saith he, „Light's burden's heavy, if for born."
Quoth I, „The main lost, cast the bye away!"
„You have spun a fair thread", he replies in scorn.
And having thus awhile each other thwarted,
Fools as we meet, no fools again we parted (p. 28).

Important for us is the use of the paremiological discourse as individual cues in the dialogue that tries to enlighten us about the meaning of love. The poem is a delightful game of wit and paradoxes constructed with the help of these exquisite fragments of experiential wisdom which are the proverbs. The delightful sonnet reminds one of the intelligence competitions organized by the lovers from

Shakespeare's comedies. The lovers want to know each other before getting intimate, namely, they are interested in testing each others' intelligence before sentimental sincerity and erotic capabilities.

In 1847 the Romanian Anton Pann similarly uses the Romanian paremiological material in his famous *Povestea vorbii* (*The Story of Speech*). Pann intends to comment on human nature and experience using proverbs and sayings. If the competition in wit and intelligence is similar with Drayton and Pann, the result of the experiential enterprise is different. There is nothing more futile then love, opines Pann, for instance in one of his proverb-ed narratives: „Again, on Love and Hatred" („Despre amor şi ură iarăşi")[3]. A certain mysogynism – woman is incapable of genuine love, she has to be controlled and dominated – is Pann's advice to those who want to take women's feelings and emotions too seriously. In the end, there is always a measure for measure and woman and the erotic attraction are no exception to this call for sobriety and caution in marital experiences. The woman who paid no attention to her first husband will be utterly punished by her second partner who will not trust her and will put her to work in exchange for supposed sexual fulfilment.

The way in which proverbs are used in the two verse narratives is extremely interesting. With Drayton, the proverbs, the markers of an aural/oral culture, are exterior to the love story falling into decrepitude. Proverbs form a kind of moralistic, cautious *mise-en-abîme* to the narration which is about the encounter of Love and I at an inn. With Pann, proverbs form the very substance of the narrative, there is no narrative framing. The distance between the two writers between the two texts is the distance between two cultures and the way in which they constructed their own identity (suppressing or allowing the communal, on the one hand, giving the individual the possibility to hide behind the communal, on the other hand. The universes of the two cultural discourses are utterly different. With Drayton, Love is an allegorical partner of discussion, with Anton Pann the interlocutor is the implied reader. There is a significant difference in the immediacy and the nearness of perception between the two texts. Pann belongs to a culture where the cult of the individual has not been able to stifle yet the pleasure of the community to judge the others and create a sense of comm-union by this evaluation. This difference is emblematic for changes brought in by modernity whose early harbinger was already in the British Isles, in the seventeenth century.

[3] „Lelea joacă până-n noapte, / Iar bărbatu-i e pe moarte. / Şi / De focul bărbatului / Joacă-n capul satului. / Şi / Lelea joacă, dănţuieşte, / Iar bărbatu-i pătimeşte. / Şi / Cumetrii bărbatu-i zace / Şi ea face ce îi place. / Zicând: / Dacă m-am căsătorit / Nu m-am şi călugărit. / Că / De drag ce-l vede, / Din ochi parcă-l pierde. / Şi / Pân-a nu-i muri bărbatul, / Ea a dat mâna cu altul. / Şi / În focul lui c-a murit / În grab' s-a căsătorit. / Dar / A dat peste dracu. / Că / Pe dragul l-a căutat, pe dracul l-a găsit. / Şi acum / Buna noastră gazdă / Se dete pe brazdă. / Ca căluşaua, / Se dă încoci-încolo, se loveşte de tânjală, / Şi-apoi vine singură la ham. / Şi / Trage ca calul la grăunţe. / Că / Toate îşi au leacul. / Şi / Arţagul îşi găseşte pârţagul" (Pann 2001, p. 228–229).

The first efforts to find Romanian equivalents to English proverbs or vice-versa go back to the nineteenth century. In 1885 Emma Barker Mawr published *Analogous Proverbs in Ten Languages*. Emma Barker Mawr was the wife of Dr. John Barker Mawr, a distinguished pediatrician from London. According to Dimitrie R. Rosetti (171-172), in 1858 dr. Barker Mawr was invited to Romania by the Romanian government in order to develop pediatric medicine. He worked at the Brâncovenesc Hospital and at the "Doamna Bălaşa" Orphanage. Dr. Barker Mawr took care of the Romanian wounded soldiers during the War of Independence (1877–1878). Emma Barker Mawr became a confidante of Carmen Sylva, the poetess queen of Romania, and she died in Bucharest at the age of 80. Besides her extraordinary book on proverbs, Emma Barker Mawr also published a book of Romanian fairy tales (Barker Mawr 1881) which she had translated into English following the example of her royal friend who retold several Romanian fairy tales. Barker Mawr starts from an English proverb and then gives its equivalent into 9 other languages. For example, „All is not gold that glitters" becomes, in Romanian, „Nu tot ce luce, este aur" (XXIV); "A word to the Wise is sufficient for them" becomes „Ajunge o măciucă bună la un car de oale" (XXIV); "Among the Blind, the One-Eyed is King" turns into „În ţara orbilor, cel cu un ochi este împărat" (XXIV); "A burnt child dreads the fire" corresponds to „Cine s-a fript la papară, suflă şi-n iaurt" (XXIV) or the well-known "A friend in need, is a friend indeed" is picturesquely rendered by „La nevoie se cunoaşte amicul, şi la boală nevasta" (XXIV). Her knowledge of Romanian proverbs is amazing and although she confesses to having been assisted by a Romanian scholar – probably, Moses Gaster, who had just been expelled from Romania by the Brătianu administration – she proves to be a serious scholar. Her linguistic knowledge is amazing, her sensitivity to the specificity of the national hiroglyphs implied in each proverb is remarkable. English proverbs are usually more abstract, the Romanians prefer a vivid picture of rural life, sometimes with ironical notes, from which they logically infer the general rule to which the proverb should lead us.

Emma Barker Mawr's attempt with English and Romanian proverbs was followed by Marcu Beza's collection of *Rumanian Proverbs* (Beza 1921). As a general characteristic, Beza prefers more or less the literal translation of proverbs sometimes using archaic verbal forms that create some kind of alienness suggesting old age, tradition.

For instance, the well known:

Până ajungi la Dumnezeu, te mănâncă sfinţii (p. 6).

becomes:

"Before you find God, you are eaten by the saints" (p. 7)

Or the proverb:

Ceea ce femeia leagă, nici dracul nu dezleagă (p. 8).

becomes:

"What a woman binds, even the devil cannot unbind" (p. 9)

Sometimes these translations of a paremiological text into another short text that tries to keep the same polysemantic values is awkward. For instance:

Golătatea înconjoară, iară foamea dă de-a dreptul (p. 12)

does not become very clear in Beza's English version:

"Nakedness turns round, hunger goes straight" (p. 13).

As for the well-known:

Cum e turcul, şi pistolul (p. 18).

becomes a blunt phrase difficult to understand for a foreigner who is not acquainted with the intricacies of Balkan history:

As the Turk, so is the pistol (p. 19).

The same holds true for:

Turcul plăteşte (p. 48).

which turns into:

The Turk pays (p. 49) –

a dry and meaningless statement that keeps nothing of the subtle irony of the original.

After a long silence that lasted half a century, in 1974 Virgil Lefter gave the Romanian readerships a dictionary of proverbs (Lefter 1974), which he resumed in 1978 and 1994. In most cases, Lefter literally translated the proverbs, in much rarer cases did he offer the equivalent proverb.

For instance,

„One hand will not wash the other for nothing" (p. 153)

becomes:

„Când o mână spală pe alta, n-o face degeaba";
„Frate, frate, dar brânza/pita-i cu bani" (p. 153).

Like Barker Mawr, although he probably did not know her work, he starts from well-known English proverbs and gives a translation of the paramiological text or a Romanian proverb that expresses the same idea but using different elements.

In 1999 Anamaria Micu published another collection of proverbs and offered us a „graceful" example of plagiarism. The first part of the book contains proverbs taken from Zanne's collection and grouped according to their theme. The second part includes Romanian proverbs and the English versions taken from Virgil Lefter and French versions taken from Elena Gorunescu's French-Romanian dictionary of proverbs. Except putting the English version and the French version together Anamaria Micu did nothing, but she calls this „translation". In

truth, translation is a betrayal but in this case what did Micu betray? Scholarly honesty beyond any doubt.

Also in 1999 Ioan Crețiu published *Vade mecum. O culegere poliglotă de proverbe* (Crețiu 1999). The book is very enjoyable because of the graphic material that illustrates certain proverbs. Proverbs are grouped thematically and they are given equivalents into Hungarian, Russian, English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Latin. Crețiu's book of proverbs is a thematic one relying on the similarity of the universe of the paremiological discourse and, if possible, the similarity of cultural contexts of the source text and the target text. The equivalence here is looked for at the level of thought and not at the level of linguistic expression. Crețiu does not translate proverbs but looks for equivalents of metaphorical or logical thought.

In 2005 Monica Mihali-Oniga and Emilia Vulturar published a *Dictionary of English–Romanian Proverbs* (Mihali-Oniga, Vulturar 2005). The book targets a didactic readership. The authors want to offer students and teachers of English a selection of English proverbs arranged according to their root word. The study of proverbs reveals the cultural specificity of the English and the Romanian languages as well as their intrinsic philosophical grid. The Romanian is much more concrete, the English is more abstract and has lost that touch with the rural universe which makes the charm of the Romanian saying. In the preface, the authors pretend that "they tried to find the equivalent Romanian proverbs, and when they did not find any, they made us of translation in order to render the meaning, and the stylistic nuance typical of the English proverb" (p. 5)[4]. But this promise remains superfluous and the authors translate literally the proverbs even where there are excellent equivalents pointing to the differences between the English and the Romanian *forma mentis*.

Here are some examples:

> "Too many cooks spoil the broth" (p. 26).

becomes:

> *Mai mulți bucătari strică supa* (p. 26)

although

> *Copilul cu multe moaşe rămâne cu buricul netăiat* –

would have been much better.

> "Like cow, like calf" (27).

becomes:

> *Cum e vaca, şi vițelul* (27),

[4] „S-a încercat găsirea unor proverbe româneşti echivalente, iar atunci când nu s-a găsit unul, s-a recurs la o traducere care să redea sensul şi coloratura stilistică, specifică proverbului englezesc" (Mihali-Oniga, Vulturar 2005, p. 5).

the authors having forgotten about

Cum e turcul, şi pistolul.

"A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" (27)

becomes:

Nu da pasărea din mână pe cea din tufiş (27)

instead of the right Romanian form:

Nu da pasărea din mână pe cea de pe gard.

Literal translation becomes almost automatic with these two authors whose approach to the complexity of the paremiological universe is quite simplistic.

The latest effort to bring Romanian and English proverbs together comes from Mihaela Mudure and Richard Proctor who published such a collection in 2010 (a revised edition of an earlier version having come out in 2003). The selection of the proverbs belongs to Călin Manilici. The authors have used English proverbs in their effort to translate Romanian proverbs into English when the Romanian and the English proverbs are quite close in their linguistic form and in their implied, condensed paremiological strategy, i.e. the hieroglyph and the logical strategy are not too remote from each other, i.e. the English proverb and the Romanian one function literally very close together.

For instance, the Romanian proverb:

Decât un an cioară, mai bine o zi şoim (p. 11)

becomes:

"Better one day as a falcon, than one year as a crow*"* (p. 11).

Or, the picturesque Romanian expression:

Sătul ca şoarecele în biserică (p. 68).

becomes:

"The well fed man and the hungry mouse.
Find nothing to nourish in God's own house" (p. 68),

the translators being able to preserve a lot of the source structure: „the mouse", „the Church" and the irony.

Or:

Căsătoriile sunt scrise în cer (p. 73)

bitterly becomes:

"Marriages are made in heaven" (p. 73).

And we could discuss here the philosophical implications of to verbs in the proverbs from the two languages. In the Romanian proverbs, marriages are the result of destiny, they are written in heaven exactly as human destiny is written over there. Nothing can change it. There is a sense of the inexorable decisions

much beyond the level of human will. On the contrary, in the English version there is a sense of a divinity that wills our destiny and whom we can influence by prayers and good behaviour. If destiny cannot be understood, in the Romanian proverb, in the English one there is a logical system that might help us understand both our lives and the universe.

Serious problems arose when we (Mudure and Proctor) had to deal with very well known proverbs. In such situations, we have preferred translation, taking the source proverb as a text in itself and translating it.

Apa trece, pietrele rămân (p. 13)

Becomes:

"Water flows, rocks remain" (p. 13).

Romanian proverbs reveal a rural universe with specific objects. We have tried adaptation, in such cases, as for instance in the ironical proverb:

Popa, pentru o babă surdă, nu toacă de două ori (p. 49)

had to become:

"The priest doesn't spend two hours ringing the bells for one deaf old woman" (p. 49).

The creator of the proverbs is not prudish. Fertility is looked at as a natural, normal phenomenon and shame does not mean prudery for the Romanian peasant. Therefore, we (Mudure and Proctor) were not afraid of thinking of the meaning of such proverbs as:

Cel scopit nu cunoaşte cinstea fetei (p. 49)

which becomes, in translation:

"A gelding wouldn't know about a girl's honesty" (p. 49).

Mudure and Proctor were equally unashamed of the rustic manners and the eroticism implied in the following saying:

Omul deştept găseşte să scarpine pe femeie unde-o mănâncă" (p. 96)

which becomes in translation:

"The clever man scratches where he knows the woman itches" (p. 96).

For the Romanian peasant, all the functions of the body are equally normal and acceptable. False prudery is very far of the rural mentality which has the directness of a simple mind that lives in nature and with nature and for whom there is nothing shameful about the body and its biological functions.

Lucrul împrumutat
Plăteşte un căcat (p. 85)

becomes:

"If you lend your neighbour with it,
He will pay you back with shit" (p. 85).

The brutality of the wording does not go hand in hand with the brutality of the mind behind the proverb but it implies the rejection of phoniness, pretence, hypocrisy, fear of the body as constructed by God and given to us to use in all its amplitude. The Romanian peasant is not afraid or shameful to notice:

Cine îşi bagă secera în cur să o scoată cu sânge (p. 91)

in English:

"Whoever thrusts his scythe in his bum, will take it out in blood".

Neither were avoided in the Mudure-Proctor collection of proverbs the ethnocentric sayings which trespass political correctness and point honestly to the limitations of any national selfhood.

Thus, the Romanian peasant was beware of foreigners, especially if they were knowledgeable in finances and business, an area which he did not understand very well and considered to be the essence of his exploitation. Consequently, the negative picture thrown upon the Greeks, for instance:

Se poftesc ca grecii la puşcărie (p. 92)

becoming, in English:

"They invite themselves in like Greeks to prison" (p. 92).

Nor are the Turks, the Romanians' historical Oriental enemy, absent in this cultural ethnic museum. The Romanian peasant has noticed that

Turcul nu caută a prinde calul cu sacul în deşert (p. 93),

in English:

"A Turk doesn't try to catch a horse with an empty bag" (p. 93).

Of course, in spite of the enormous amount of work put into the collection by Mudure and Proctor, this does not mean that the target text is perfect. There is still place for improvement. Here is one example which is still bothering the authors:

Spune-mi cu cine te-nsoţeşti
Ca să-ţi spun cine eşti (p. 71)

was translated as:

"No man is ever better
Than those with whom he walk together" (p. 71),

although "Birds of a feather flock together" would have been much better.

In conclusion, we should emphasize again the richness of the universe of signification of the proverbs. Translating proverbs, i.e. setting these universes into contrast, remains a never ending, extremely challenging task that we'll help us know the others better and the others to know us better. Work is immense but results are equally rewarding. A final piece of advice for those who want to enter the world of the proverbs in order to understand them and the culture they come from, use them for better comprehending the world we live in. Do not forget, keep

this in mind: proverbs are the generous gift of the past generations who share with us their meanings and their effort to humanize themselves and their world. Experience and work are unavoidable. In other words,

Ca să stingi un foc, trebuie să te-arunci în el (p. 17)

"To put out a fire you must throw yourself into it" (p. 17).

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Cuvinte-cheie: *proverbe*, *traducere*, *hieroglif*, *literal*, *context coşerian*, *parafrază.*
Keywords: *proverbs*, *translation*, *hieroglyph*, *literal*, *coşerian context*, *paraphrase.*

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